

# Murray-Mallee Imaginaries: Towards a Literary History of a Region

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The Mallee is not readily identified with literary history, and when it is, most often as one stop on a national literary map, limitations appear. Open any compendium of Australian literary history and look under ‘Mallee.’ We can tell you the names you will see there: they will be white, mostly male (Nancy Cato, the author of the *All The Rivers Run* trilogy, is the repeated exception), mid-twentieth century and earlier—Thomas Browne aka ‘Rolf Boldrewood,’ the peripatetic poet John Shaw Neilson, and Major Thomas Mitchell. These are all well-known and well-regarded figures very much associated with the region, but their recurrence as representatives of Mallee literary history indicates a problem that does not lie with their writing per se, rather with a lack of critical attention to the Mallee as a place imagined and produced through its literature. Recent humanities scholarship more broadly has brought renewed attention to the Mallee region, significantly expanding our knowledge of its human and non-human life. However, this work has mostly focused on environmental and social history (Anderson; Holmes and Mirmohamadi; Burch) and biographical accounts of place (Carter). Kylie Mirmohamadi’s consideration of the rural romance genre, ‘Love on the Land,’ is an exception; using examples such as Kerry McGinnis’s *Mallee Sky* it suggests the timeliness of reconsidering Mallee writing and its history in different terms from the region-within-the nation encyclopedic account.

In the context of literature and place-making, we want to consider the idea of an expanded Mallee literary history and its potential to contribute to how place is imagined, lived and made in this region. In doing so, this essay posits that the rehearsal of narrow and exclusionary narratives of a place, via its literary history, is a problem not just because of its omissions but also because of its contributions to place imaginaries. What is the consequence of a narrow and partial account of the literature of a place, on that place? In turn, we wonder, how can this be challenged? Our aim is to produce a literary history of the Mallee that offers diverse accounts of the region which unsettle narrative hegemony, opening up the different imaginaries that have generated, and been generated by, this place. Just what constitutes the Mallee region and its community is an open question that feeds into this unsettlement. Innovations in the field of regional literary history in Australia inform our approach: scholars such as Philip Mead and Tony Hughes-D’Aeth have challenged the positioning of the region as a component of the nation, and instead, consider regionality as a fluid composition not circumscribed by borders or spatial hierarchy, and that emerges in imaginative terms, as much as it does geographic or environmental ones. With this in mind, the essay considers what regional literary history offers to the place/s to which it attends. What are the stories about that place which regional literary history can elicit? We look at the Murray River as a geography (both material and discursive) which contributes to this diversity of place-story of the Mallee, and helps to think through how regional literary history may be done differently. Towards a conclusion,

and through a final discussion of two approaches to ‘making’ a literary history that is diffuse, reader-centred, and participatory, we contribute to a growing practice of alternative methodologies for producing regional literary history.

### **The Mallee and Its Literary History**

‘The Mallee’ is generally known now as a region of north-west Victoria that is identified by its iconic vegetation: the knobbly-rooted, spindly-branched Mallee tree. This is semi-arid country, with the Murray, part of the wide ranging Murray Darling river system and one of the continent’s most significant rivers, running along its northern edges. Despite the bioregional definition of the Mallee that extends it across three states (Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia), the Victorian Mallee is colloquially and administratively distinguished from the ‘Murray Mallee’ in South Australia. Kerang and the Loddon River are the generally considered its eastern boundary while the southern boundary is usually given as a line extending through Lake Hindmarsh to the South Australian border (*Victorian Places*).<sup>1</sup>

This postcolonial construct is the country of the Latji Latji, Paakantji (Barkindji), Ngayampaa, Mutthi Mutthi, Wemba Wemba, Tati Tati and Barapa Barapa, who date human presence here, certainly along the Murray at least, as tens of thousands of years old (Murray District Aboriginal Services; Holmes and Mirmohamadi). European explorers and then surveyors made the first post-contact forays into the region in the 1830s (although its first European ‘sightings’ are recorded in 1817 (Watson 154)), beginning the displacement of Indigenous people which intensified as the Mallee was systematically colonised by pastoralists in the mid-nineteenth century. In the first 40 years of colonisation in the Mallee, most of its Indigenous people were forced to Ebenezer and Lake Tyers missions, however massacres did occur, most notably three incidents along the Murray River near Robinvale, committed and recorded by Thomas Mitchell’s expedition in 1836. One of these was at the junction of the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers, involving settlers and stockmen in 1846; another incident involved Native Police at the Loddon junction. While these massacres usually involved firearms, a third killing was undertaken using poison on the Beveridge family’s run between today’s Swan Hill and Piangil (Centre for 21st Century Humanities).

Researchers at the Centre for 21st Century Humanities at the University of Newcastle have found that many major massacres happened alongside rivers, but some battle sites are now under dams, reservoirs and weirs. ‘That’s where the majority of Aboriginal people were, that was where the good pastoral land was and that’s where the settlers wanted to be’ Professor Lyndall Ryan has said. She argues for the possibility of tangible markers to commemorate those who died. ‘I think it would be possible along the Murray River to have some well-identified signs [saying]: “This was a battle site”’ (cited in Brennan). There is textual evidence of Indigenous grave sites along the Murray in Mildura. *Mildura Calling*, Alice Lapthorne’s idiosyncratic 1946 history of the city, refers to two Aboriginal graves, ‘with tents and implements’ which stood on the river bank at ‘Pinkie Bend’ just below W.B. Chaffey’s grand house Rio Vista (Lapthorne 30). Although it is an overwhelmingly triumphalist celebration of Mildura’s founding, Lapthorne’s text is striking—and unusual amongst amateur local histories in the region—for its acknowledgement of Indigenous displacement, even if in strangely romanticised terms: ‘When, above the sleeping city, the clock in the tower of the Carnegie Library strikes the hour,’ Lapthorne wonders, ‘does the ghost of some homeless aborigine seeking by night his lost camping ground, turn in affright and flee the brilliantly lighted streets, which were once a wilderness of Mallee scrub?’ This spectral presence is a conventional technique

of the colonising imaginary, yet Laphorne's musing here directly addresses the transformations that dispossession wrought, to both people and their environment.

In general, however, the post-invasion experience of Indigenous communities in the Mallee is less well circulated than its settler-colonial history—not uncommon in Australia, of course—but in the Mallee this subdued recognition reflects the region's ambivalent presence within the colonial mind: a place of endeavour and hope, but also collapse, darkness, and despair. Katie Holmes and Kylie Mirmohamadi have traced these shifting non-Indigenous visions of the Mallee, from 'howling wilderness,' to land of economic promise, to bitter endurance and the failure of colonial dreams. The scrubby, unfamiliar land that appeared without promise to the first Europeans to traverse it, was soon in the sights of surveyors, followed by pastoralists and then agriculturalists (after the 'relentless and terminal decline' (Burch 52) of the former due to the Mallee's irregular rain patterns) who invested in the promise of technological innovation. Modern equipment, new materials (particularly superphosphate supplement for soil), and, along the river, irrigation, to remake Mallee lands as a productive expanse. This optimistic vision failed to materialise for many farmers, particularly in the 'back country' (Burch), away from the riverine environment that afforded a reliable water supply. As settlement intensified, and Mallee trees were uprooted in their thousands, soil eroded and loosened, often blowing away in the infamous dust storms that blackened the sky. These storms fed the region's nightmarish reputation, as did frequent plagues of mice, rabbits and locusts which worsened conditions for already imperilled farming communities.

It was water insecurity, however, that drove many farmers to ruin. Into the twentieth century, informed by El Niño patterns, and as the environmental impacts of clearing and farming took hold, drought undid fantasies of the Mallee as a land of abundance (see Anderson). When the soil was not blowing away, it was 'baked so hard that it was impossible to plough' (Holmes and Mirmohamadi 211). Technology did not deliver its promise. The anti-hero of Carrie Tiffany's 1930s Mallee novel, *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, Robert Pettergree, so invests in the idea of modern farming that drought devastates him ontologically as well as economically. The obstinacy of drought and the degrading land cannot be overcome by the most up to date of methods and supplements.

Fences mark one man's crop from another but they have no power over the land itself. They can't contain the sandy soil that blows in vast rolling clouds most afternoons. The soil storms rush through trees and dams and herds of anxious sheep who lie down and think it is night... The soil is so high against the door of the machinery shed Robert has to dig the tractor free each morning. (Tiffany 160–61)

Because of this history, the Mallee remains a region strongly associated with the archetypal experience of 'battling' the land, and not always winning. Victorian Mallee populations have declined steadily since the beginning of the twentieth century and its landmark 'Federation drought' (so-called because of its coincidence with the nation's federation), which lasted for several years. It is a region under notable social stress and in long-term economic decline, with high rates of unemployment and mental health issues (Austin; Sartore et al.). It is also increasingly vulnerable to environmental pressures such as rising salinity, decreased rainfall and species loss. Water is a

precarious commodity in the Mallee, and climate change is compounding this. In 2009, certain Victorian Mallee communities were counted as Australia's first climate change refugees (Ker), with temperatures rising by 0.1 degree per decade since 1950 (DSE). At the time of writing, the Mallee is being impacted, in some parts significantly, by a current drought across south-eastern Australia.

It is fair to say that this is the dominant cultural narrative of the Mallee—hardship, optimism, failure and struggle. It is unsurprising then, that the few existing literary historical discussions of the Mallee (and by this we mean summative, analytic accounts of the literature of the region—and by literature we mean poetically constituted narrative works) tend to rehearse and reinforce this narrative, too. The entry for 'Mallee' in the *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (1987) cites the colonial poet C.A. Sherard's horror-filled imaginings of being 'lost in the Mallee' in his poem of that name. Nancy Cato's 'Mallee Farmer,' we are told, 'also has no consoling note ... At the end of this poem, "the land is left to the crows and the stones"' (234).

In this typical account, Mallee literary history begins with non-Indigenous settlement, excluding precolonial literary history, and is predominantly masculinist—even when women are mentioned—in its framing metaphors of battle and endurance. Cato is one of the few women who appear in treatments of Mallee literature; it is characterised as predominantly male, as well as white, with provenance in the nineteenth and early-mid-twentieth century, the formative years of Australian nationalist identity (Turner).<sup>2</sup> A small group of writers consistently represent the Mallee, including Thomas Browne aka 'Rolf Boldrewood,' the peripatetic poet John Shaw Neilson, and Nancy Cato, the author of the *All The Rivers Run* trilogy. Accounts of explorers, surveyors and travellers such as Major Thomas Mitchell and Charles Sturt, and the Aboriginal 'Protector' Augustus Robinson, who wrote performatively for readers in the centres of colonial life (Melbourne, London and Sydney), are often reproduced. Mitchell's description of the Mallee as 'one of the most barren environments in the world' has been widely referenced, reinforcing prevailing views of the Mallee (cited in Pierce, ed. 234).

When we began our work on Mallee literary history, we wondered about the impact of this narrative in the region itself. Themes of endurance and hardship might resonate for a community still facing social and economic challenges. What does it mean, however, for a dominant place story to repeat itself in the literary history of a place? Our project is informed by the idea that stories do not simply emerge from a place; rather, the relationship is dynamic. Place is also 'made after the story' (Barton; Carter). This acknowledges the power that stories have on emergent communities and their material, more-than-human worlds. With this in mind, we can consider how the perpetuation of a singular place story through literary history impacts upon a community. How might, in turn, an expanded literary history that looks beyond the limits of a white, masculinist declensionist story contribute to the present and future of the Mallee region?

'Literary history' is generally understood as referencing an historical body of textual work pertaining to place, time, cultural force, form, or writer and reader. There is no singular understanding of literary history, yet there are dominant modes of practice. These, in particular, relate to place, which is the longstanding, default organiser of literary history, especially, the coordinates of textual origin and authorial provenance (Levine). This means that the spatio-temporal place of the text's 'birth,' and also its author's, generally give shape to literary history. Commonly, too, this spatio-temporal frame is understood in nationalist terms, wherein localised

literatures or literary ‘points on the map’ are fixed within the geographic and imaginary matrix of the nation. The Mallee appears in national literary histories such as *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000), and *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009) via the work of individual authors but does not merit its own space, which is partly to do with the ways in which literary histories have traditionally been organised. A notable exception is *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (1987) which dedicates two entries to the South Australian and Victorian Mallee regions with a catalogue of—mostly negative—writerly responses.

Critics have increasingly been pointing out the limits of these approaches. Caroline Levine’s work on forms in the context of literary history is particularly influential for us. The nation, she argues, may be the dominant form for thinking about, and writing, literary history, but there is nothing natural about it.<sup>5</sup> ‘Historical knowledge can be organised around many forms,’ she points out (653). Autochthony reinforces the primacy of the national form however, with its associations of naturalised belonging in place, rooted from its beginnings, as well as a moral hierarchy of connection: that is, those who can claim to ‘belong’ more than others. Moreover, the identification of a meaningful, demarcated ‘local’ within this national space, and to which literary history is tied, refuses to see the networks within which texts and their authors are situated. It ‘ignores all kinds of traveling and deracinated influences: cultural shapings that come from afar,’ in the production of a text (Levine 653).

Following Levine, the network rather than the nation expands the possibilities for literary history in the Mallee. Relevant literatures may be written in other places, and generate an idea of the Mallee, or offer different versions of it across time and from different places. They may be works written in the Mallee, but engaged beyond it, and they may be works that have been rewritten, or reiterated over time. They may, of course, be non-written—oral narratives, for instance. With this in mind, regionality is a conceptual template that allows an escape from a national paradigm and opens up the possibilities for an expansive, more inclusive literary history in the Mallee. It extends the definition of Mallee literary history beyond conventional geographic and imaginative boundaries. Here, too, the contingent nature of ‘the Mallee’ on certain determinants (local council coordinates, community identification) suggests the flexibility of this literary category.

Paul Carter’s study of the Mallee as a creative region (which focuses on John Shaw Neilson as a key Mallee writer, along with two other non-literary producers of Mallee narratives, Indigenous man ‘Jowley,’ and non-Indigenous land owner William Stanbridge) reorients its geography through this regional imaginary of networks that can only ever extend. Regions, he writes, are ‘composed of all the paths and their crossings’ (Carter 92). They are shifting alliances of disparate and dispersed elements. Informed by this thinking, there is no need to delimit ‘the Mallee’ to one location or set of boundaries: instead the Mallee can be understood as a constantly emerging constellation of places, communities, and stories that will not be reduced to one set of coordinates or a single environment.

The practice of regional literary history emerged in the mid-1980s with the publication of Patrick Morgan’s two books on the literary history of Gippsland; *The Literature of Gippsland: The Social and Historical Context of Early Writings, with Bibliography* (1986) and *Shadow and Shine: An Anthology of Gippsland Literature* (1988). These works were stimulated by Morgan’s work as

editor on the *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (1988) which was the first text to provide detailed entries on suburbs, towns and regions such as the Monaro, Riverina and the Mallee.

The burgeoning interest in regional literary history (and relatedly, creative regional history), demonstrated by works such as Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay's *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (2007), and Cheryl Taylor's study of Mt Isa novels (2013), attests to the possibilities of this approach. Tony Stagg and Phillip Mead deploy 'critical regionalism' as a counter to the impulse for totalising accounts of literary history, whether in nationalist terms or in the 'collective literary system' of Moretti's global literary network (316). Regionalism, they argue, enables the 'locational singularities of literary texts and their production' (316) to shape the account of literary history, and in turn to recognise the multiplicity of place (the 'micro-regions' within regions) (321) which works against a literary historical account that perpetuates fixed identities.

Tony Hughes D'Aeth's recent study of the literary history of the Western Australian wheatbelt illuminates this region beyond a geography and topography, and understands it instead as a 'psychic phenomenon,' inseparable from the imaginative work that contributed to its making. This imaginative work was enacted in policy, publicity, government literature, and agricultural practices, and more—including, of course, literary texts. Importantly, as Hughes D'Aeth contends, this work was not only meaningful in national terms as part of the armature of national myth-making. It was intimately connected to global movements of modernisation, embodied in 'the ideology of wheat' (22) that represented 'the reshaping of the world through the mechanisms of globalising capital' (28) and from which 'the Mallee,' in part, emerged.

Although Hughes-D'Aeth doesn't pursue this expanded definition, in a bioregional account, 'the Mallee' extends to this Wheatbelt region of Western Australia (defined by their common ecosystems). Thus, through these various elisions, we can see the expansive potential for a regional account of a place and its literature. Kylie Mirmohamadi's examination of Mallee rural romance novels operates bioregionally, connecting three contemporary works of Mallee literature, each set in a different part of the Mallee, across three state borders. While Mirmohamadi reads these works as discursively contributing to a normative Mallee narrative ('drawing upon that region's specific place in Australian settler histories'—a land of struggle, heroism etc. (205)), it is evident how they unsettle this narrative, reinterpreting masculinist history through a contemporary female experience of endurance and triumph: it is now 'the independent, tough-minded woman battling the land' (Watts, cited in Mirmohamadi 209). Moreover, these texts generically connect to an international context, bearing a strong relation to what Mirmohamadi identifies as American 'farm literature,' itself a relative of the American Western. A recent rise in popularity of farm literature across the world, Mirmohamadi tells us, is related to the impacts of the global financial crisis and the lure of 'aspirational' literature which it generated (210).

### **New Literary History in the Mallee: Looking to the River**

The Mallee is geography, but it is also topography. It is located, but it is also conceptual. It is narrated by many voices, through many modes and forms, across time and place. For the remainder of this paper, we want to engage with one particular aspect of this multiplicity. The Mallee is predominantly drylands, but it is also made up of water. Despite its aridity, ephemeral water sources (the series of lakes throughout north western Victoria, for instance, that remain bone dry for years), and its profound association with drought, the Mallee is also traversed by the 'mighty' Murray

River. The river is nearly invisible in most references to Mallee literature, but it is a potent material and imaginative force in the region. How to account for this in our project of regional literary history?

Here we find productive the de-naturalising of the nation as the logical organising force for literary history. Levine's critique reminds us that 'the nation'—amongst all the things that is: an imaginary, a series of practices, an institution etc—is also a *form*. By this, Levine means an 'ordering, patterning, or shaping' (5) of materials, relations, time and space that organise thought and expression. 'Forms matter,' she writes, 'because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context' (5). That is, forms are constraining, but they are also enabling. They are also endlessly flexible. If the nation is not a natural form for literary history, what about a river? And how might a literary history guided by river-form contribute to the goal of a less colonising, more inclusive and diverse regional literary history? To this end, we will consider five texts which engage with the Murray River, Nancy Cato's *Time Flow Softly* which is part of the *All the Rivers Run* trilogy (1958–1962), Michael Meehan's *The Salt of Broken Tears* (1999), Bill Green's *Small Town Rising* (1981), Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's *Watershed* (2005), and Charlie Archbold's *Mallee Boys* (2017).

Before discussing these texts in more detail, we acknowledge that the history of storytelling in the Mallee is tens of thousands of years old. The Murray river corridor has been continuously occupied for many thousands of years and was possibly one of the most densely populated areas of Aboriginal Australia (Mulvaney and Kamminga 303). John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga suggest that Murray River societies 'did not venture far from the riverine corridor,' though newer scholarship indicates that there was extensive agricultural practice by Indigenous people in the Mallee 'back country' (Burch). Back country areas were previously believed to be visited seasonally but now this is being re-considered, to account for more complex interconnections between the Murray River and the drier, scrubbiest Mallee lands.

Within this history, the Indigenous peoples of the region tell a number of creation stories involving the Murray River. The Bangerong people have the story of an old woman who went on a long walk down from the mountain and across the great flat plain, dragging her digging stick in the sand. She was followed by Toonatpan, an angry snake of many colours which thrashed to and fro, deepening the track. When the rain came, it began to trickle along the track the snake had made. The Ngarrindjeri tell a better-known story about Ponde (or Pondee) a giant cod, which created a track which became the Murray River. Due to the popularisation of this story through various publications in the 1960s and '70s, this story has now effectively become, for the non-Aboriginal community, entrenched as the principal creation story for the Murray River as a whole. As Indigenous people have explained the significance of creation stories, these do not just refer historically but also reference the ongoing life of these ancestors as a way to understand the river ecology and its future. Heather Goodall, a non-Indigenous anthropologist who has collaboratively recorded Indigenous oral stories in the Murray Darling Basin, puts it this way: this 'continued presence... enlivens the country, making both waters and lands into "storied country"' (34).

In this expansive context of Indigenous storytelling, the first non-Indigenous Murray River narratives were produced by early explorers such as Hume and Hovell, Sturt, Mitchell and Robinson the 'Protector' of the Aborigines. Explorers saw the Murray as the most significant landmark in south eastern Australia, providing a way to navigate the new country. They observed that Australian

rivers differed significantly from English rivers. Paul Carter notes that Sturt recognised that Australian rivers could not be relied upon, either downstream or upstream (Carter 55). With the partial exception of the Murray, Australian rivers were not ‘purposeful’ in the European sense. T.L. Mitchell also observed that ‘Each Australian river seems to have some peculiar character, sustained with remarkable uniformity throughout the whole course’ (Mitchell 135). A.S. Kenyon has noted that ‘[t]he Murray has been termed the Nile of Australia. A much better comparison would be the Mississippi; but indeed it needs no comparison. It possesses features of its own, quite characteristic and quite Australian’ (Kenyon n.p.).

Rivers enable explorers to work out where they are and to determine the best way to proceed. Explorers’ reports on the Murray served to ‘open up the interior,’ including the Mallee back country, to subsequent settlers. Sturt and Mitchell devote substantial journal space to reflections on the Murray, noting its strategic importance as well as the aesthetic pleasure it afforded. As Holmes and Mirmohamadi observe, most nineteenth-century European encounters with a new landscape were framed within the conventions of the picturesque (195), and explorers’ texts tend to apprehend the river in these terms: a pleasant view that would fit within the frame of a painting. Yet the Murray always threatened to escape. This is the nature of rivers, to always breach their boundaries, to elude efforts to fix them in place. As T.S. McMillan argues, rivers have notoriously paradoxical qualities; they have the ability to be or do several things at once. They move over land changing considerably from source to destination but they also stay, remaining as constant waypoints and lasting landmarks (McMillan xii).

One of the first post-exploration Murray River narratives was *Up the Murray* by Ada Cambridge, which was serialised in *The Australasian* in 1875, yet the river merely provides a backdrop for a novel which is primarily about a young woman seeking a suitable marriage.<sup>4</sup> Mark Twain called the Murray ‘Australia’s Mississippi’ when he visited Australia in the early 1900s. Although not as powerful as the Mississippi, the Murray counts as a major river in a country of seasonal, intermittent streams. In Twain’s writing about the Mississippi, especially *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) which included his 1875 memoir ‘Old Times on the Mississippi,’ he recounts his training as a riverboat captain ‘learning the river,’ which meant reading the river like a book. Philadelphia Gordon (or Delie) in Nancy Cato’s *All the Rivers Run* trilogy is also driven to memorise the river’s characteristics after her riverboat captain husband becomes disabled.

In *Time, Flow Softly* (1959), when Delie is a newly married woman, she has her first encounter with a Mallee farm. The riverboat has been detained by drought for almost a year, prompting her to disembark to seek milk and butter.

[S]he could see away across the monotonous flats of mallee scrub, a sea of dark-green leaves and thin branches; and among them, quite near, the clearing of a desolate, drought-stricken mallee farm. Its fences were half-buried in sand-drifts, its paddocks bore crops of white limestone pebbles. (156–57)

As she climbs out of the boat, she notes how strange it is to see the water of the river ‘lying in a lifeless pool; the charm it had had for her was in its irresistible, endless flow onward’ (157). Delie speaks to the weathered-looking woman of the house, Mrs Slope, and tells her about the boat’s stranding. Mrs. Slope says: ‘It couldn’t ‘ve been worse than this place ... The everlastin’ mallee—



I hate it!' (158). She speaks of the terrible year of drought due to the 'hogging' of water up river, with the loss of all their sheep, their crops withering and blowing away, the paddocks full of stones.

'But you have the river' Delie says.

'Yairs; the river makes it bearable. But it makes you kind of restless, though—when it's flowing I mean, not how it is now.

Mrs Slope's comment draws attention to one of the strongest characteristics of rivers—their motivity: the way in which they summon 'settled' people to get up and go. When Delie finds out more about Mrs Slope's situation, this comment takes on even greater significance.

Inside the Slope's farmhouse, Delie hears a 'wailing, snuffling noise' beyond a blanket hanging from the roof which cuts off part of the kitchen, causing Mrs Slope's face to harden into its 'former bitter lines' (159). Sensing Mrs Slope's deep anger, she observes: '[t]here was something poisonous, some corrosive hate, in the atmosphere of this drought-stricken farm' (163). Later she finds out that the snuffling comes from a disabled child, with 'small, animal eyes' and a 'cretinous head no wider than the neck, the ears set flat against the head and too low down' (167). Delie discovers that this monstrous boy is the product of an incestuous union between Mr Slope and his intellectually impaired daughter. Mrs Slope tells Delie: 'I swear if there was another one I'd kill it with me own hands. I'd drown it in the river' (167). The river is a tantalising prospect for Mrs Slope who is trapped in a claustrophobic existence. But it's also a means for committing infanticide (the river is also the site of the death of two of Delie's babies, one who is stillborn after a fire on the riverboat and another baby with Down Syndrome which she deliberately neglects; a form of euthanasia). Cato acknowledges the toll taken on women (and their families) by the harsh life of the Mallee. The river offers both freedom and constraint for Cato's protagonist, allowing her to ply her trade but also to escape stifling domesticity, at least partially.

The Murray is used in Cato's trilogy as a model for temporal flow. In her old age, Delie sees a riverboat going through the Goolwa channel near her home. Seeking a connection with her old way of life she wades into the water and is bitten by a snake. In Delie's mind, the snake becomes synonymous with the river she has spent her life navigating: 'It was as if the river itself had risen and struck at her. The snake was the river and the river was Time ... Time like an ever-rolling stream...' (275).

In *All the Rivers Run* (1958–1962), the Murray is inextricably linked with both birth and death; it is the source of Delie's income, the inspiration for much of her painting and finally the agent of Delie's demise. Although Cato adhered to the common belief that Aboriginal people were in permanent decline, creation stories play a large part in her construction of her textual river Murray. At the end of the trilogy Delie's spirit merges with the river at its source, high in the Australian Alps 'where a little stream, just born, moved invisibly beneath the snow' (275). Susan Sheridan argues that Cato's romance of the river is a text which particularly invites a reading of its representation of the natural world and human relationships to it. Cato's trilogy encompasses both a significant ecological critique of settler uses of the river system and a celebration of the transcendental qualities of nature. Yet Cato has been accused of 'quietism' by Paul Sharrad, who claims that her Gaia-like belief that nature will outlast everything is dangerous. For her part, Sheridan contends that the celebratory tenor of Cato's text is often in tension with its critical perspectives on human exploitation of the river.

Michael Meehan's novel *The Salt of Broken Tears* (1999) seeks to engage more directly with the first peoples of the Murray's riparian zones. Set in the 1920s, the novel follows a boy who travels around the Victorian Mallee seeking a girl named Eileen who 'blew in' during a dust storm and then fled after being assaulted, leaving her bloody clothes behind 'in the shape of her body' (5). The boy believes that she has left with Cabel Singh, an Afghan trader who travels in a circular route around the Mallee. Cabel is described as a 'poet' by an itinerant bag-sewer, based on the poet John Shaw Neilson.

What Cabel says is that these are good spaces for launching dreams in because there's no tall trees to clog up the sky and there aren't many people around to trample through them. And those that are tend to mind their own business. (145–46)

Here the Mallee is constructed as a space in which flights of the imagination can be sustained, in the absence of tall trees and people. Rather than being characterised as a place of loss, the arid landscape is figured as fertile terrain for dreaming.

Greg Pritchard notes that Meehan characterises the Mallee as a 'badland': an area that is 'unfit for human habitation or intervention, where nature is sovereign. The Mallee, in Meehan's novel, is still contested space and it is undecided who will win; nature or the settlers' (Pritchard 62). The farms are mostly inhabited by desperate soldier settlers, including the boy's father, who believe that the horrors of war are preferable to a hard-scrabble existence on inferior land.

There are a few moments of reprieve at Kulkynne when the boy swims in the Murray with his horse and dog, observed by local Indigenous people.

All the time they played, the people from the tall trees watched in silence, emerging one by one from behind the trees as they splashed and barked and laughed ... These last of the bush people watched the three strangers playing in their stretch of river. (164)

When he is dressed again the 'bush people' ask him to come with them to their camp amid wreckage of 'the cans and bags and clothing they had fished out of the river, living on what the river had sent them' (165). The river is the focal point of this community, bringing them sustenance but also detritus from upstream. The next day they take him to see a platform of branches, 'raised above the height of a tall man above the ground' he climbs up to the platform and finds a mummified white man wearing red and white striped pyjamas. Frightened about what might happen to them if the body remains there, the people ask the boy what they should do. 'Now they waited each day for punishment of some kind to come down upon them, on the river which had provided all they needed and now cursed them in this way' (170).

Even though they played no part in the man's death, they believe that the river will be marred by the presence of his corpse if it is not dealt with in the proper way. The boy says he will take the corpse to a town in the south—Annuello or Manangatang—but instead breaks his promise, burying it without ceremony, unable to stand the stench any longer. The bush people's meticulous care of the white man's corpse is contrasted with the boy's seeming disregard for its proper burial,

suggesting that settler culture, represented by the wandering boy, has become spiritually impoverished in this harsh environment.

The dead man turns out to be a missing banker whose widow the boy encounters in a barren town 'close to the saltlakes' (191–92). Before his death in the river, the banker had become increasingly obsessed with a plan to bring water across from the river 'all the way to the dry country' to flood the saltlake so that 'the land around it would become green and fertile and grow strong crops every year' (192). As a banker he would be required to foreclose on farmers who couldn't succeed on the land. Given that farmers walked off Mallee land in droves due to its unsustainability, this would have been a regular occurrence, driving him to impossible irrigation fantasies. The exchange between the 'bush people' and the boy at the river represents an important moment in a novel which is largely characterised by violence and alienation. The river is figured as a space in which the boy can play freely, but also as a 'neutral' zone which enables cross-cultural communication.

By contrast Bill Green's novel *Small Town Rising* (1981) depicts the Murray as a boundary which separates white from black. The novel is set in the Mallee service town of 'Strong Lake' which could be partly based on the 'real' towns of Swan Hill or Sea Lake.

There were no lakes for thirty miles in any direction. In the early days some concerned citizens, suspecting they were living in a joke created by a drunken exploring party long ago, and made uneasy by it, asked the shire council to change the name. However the meeting was dominated by a baker-poet who who said it was possible to have a lake of land. He claimed that in a certain evening light, if one looked from the river across the flatlands, there was a depression several miles wide which shone with a watery light. (2)

Strong Lake has this characteristic in common with the Mallee town of Sea Lake which is associated with Lake Tyrrell, a salt lake, and a site of great significance to Indigenous people. (Located seven kilometres away from Sea Lake, Lake Tyrrell is not visible from the town.)

In Strong Lake all Indigenous people live over the river in desperate poverty and are discouraged from entering the town by Vince, the local police chief. Vince mounts an increasingly violent campaign against the Indigenous settlement over the river, forcing them to move further away. The trigger for this rampage is the alleged rape of the mayor's daughter by an unknown Aboriginal man. Vince and Frank (the mayor) set out to investigate the damage to the 'boong' camp and discover that destroyed humpies have already been rebuilt 'about half a mile down river' (98).

Looking at the new humpies filled Frank with anger ... Surely they could see that they had to pull up their socks. The mess they had squatted into overnight was beyond his comprehension ... His sweaty anger was changing into something nastier. 'This is shit,' he yelled, looking at Vince rather wildly. He made a tripping run towards the nearest humpy and kicked at it, his foot making a muffled crash. (99)

In retaliation for the police chief's increasingly aggressive behaviour towards local Aboriginal people, John, the doctor's son, and Chasa, an Indigenous boy from the 'white side' of the river, vandalise the police launch and cut its moorings loose. This echoes Bill Green's own experience in Swan Hill as a boy. He and his friends witnessed the burning down of humpies housing homeless

Indigenous people and deliberately released the police boat downriver. The autobiographical element of this novel suggests that Green's formative years in Swan Hill, which is located on the Murray River, were a major influence on the creation of the fictional town of Strong Lake.

Tragically Chasa drowns in the Murray after fleeing from public vilification. Following the loss of his friend, John confines himself to guerilla actions against people who hurt animals. 'Over the months following Chasa's disappearance he perceived that cruelties were only practised on animals and weak people. The strong were ignored, rarely attacked. Anything that couldn't take a bit of battering was done for' (166). The book ends with the line: 'Some time later he laughed at himself for being a great defender of dogs: he couldn't do the same things for people' (167). In *Small Town Rising* Green satirises the viciousness of life in this small town which is poisoned by its pervasive racism.

Indigenous author Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's novel *Watershed* (2005) is set in the Mallee town of 'Sturtspond' which is most likely based on Mildura. The re-naming of Mildura as 'Sturtspond' alludes to the explorer Charles Sturt who encountered the Murray River in 1830. It might also be read as a humorous reference to the seemingly arbitrary (even inappropriate) names given by colonisers to Mallee places such as Swan Hill and Sea Lake that denied the literal aesthetics and ecology of these places. Sturtspond, like Mildura, is located on the Murray River which has been tamed in order to provide water for the irrigation of fruit trees. The existence of Sturtspond is enabled by brutal interference with the river's flow, in the form of lochs and weirs.

The central character of *Watershed* is Eve, a former 'golden girl' of swimming who has gone into a steep psychological decline since the disappearance of her son David in the Murray. Her only regular activities are drinking cask wine, feeding David's captive Murray Cod named 'Mazza' and training the Murray Cods swim squad at the D.M. Beunetti Memorial Pool which is named after her dead son. Her husband Marconi, the son of Italian migrants, is devastated by David's absence and the damage wrought by the drought and increasing salination of their farm which was once a thriving orchard begun by his father. While fishing in the Murray with Indigenous man Ace, Marconi is told a creation story about an ancestor called Ngurunderi who goes looking for his two wives and hears them 'giggling their way down near the sea,' so he decides to 'track 'em along the Murray and cut 'em off at the pass' (Bayet-Charlton 85). He tries to spear Ponde, a big Murray cod in a little creek, who uses his big snout to push the dirt and the rocks apart.

After having a bit of a feed, Ngurunderi decided it wasn't fair that Ponde was the big know-it-all of the river, so he cut up the dead fatso and renamed chunks of the flesh new fish of the river. And, naturally, as these chunks hit the water they became all the other fish of the Murray ... But Ngurunderi felt a bit sorry for Ponde in the end and threw in one last bit and said, 'You can stay being Ponde, but not such a fat bugger this time round.' (85)

Marconi asks Ace for the point of the story and Ace counters with his own questions: 'If the fish are Ponde, what does that make us? What does that make the river?' (87). Marconi misunderstands, thinking that Ace is alluding to his own son who might be 'cut up in the river somewhere' (87). Eve's despair over her son's death threatens to pull her under; she tries to drown herself in the river:

‘Take me’ she swallows, spitting venom at the water. She ducks her head beneath the surface and screams, ‘Take me, you bastard. Take me to him.’ But the river doesn’t. It simply pushes her into the roots of bleached river gums. Dead wood ghost-grey against the brown water. (107)

Both Eve and Marconi pit themselves against the dangers of the environment they inhabit, passively willing it to finish them off. Towards the end of the novel, Marconi decides to embark on his own personal wager—he walks to the western boundary of his property in the blazing heat without any water and starts to walk along the edge of the Murray towards home. If he makes it back alive, he will try to save his marriage, if he doesn’t, the drought will beat him like so many other farmers in the region.

The dwindling river is central to Bayet-Charlton’s narrative; she shows how its diminution accords with the salination of the once-thriving Beunetti farm, exacerbated by the drought. The Murray cod is a recurring motif deriving from the Ngurunderi creation story. In Ace’s formulation, the cod are all Ponde, while the inhabitants of the area are following in the footsteps of the ‘ancestor fella’ who sought to find his lost wives. With the river in decline, the cod are failing to breed, stagnating in the river, ‘floating face-down dead in the water’ or getting ‘fished, removed, eaten’ (244). Ace problematises any easy division between human and non human presences in the river.

For Paul Sinclair, Murray cod are ‘repositories of meaning, at once symbolic of profound social and ecological change, while also deeply rooted in specific times and places. Murray cod are tokens of a way of life’ (128). They have deep significance for inhabitants of the region yet the interiority of the cod is rarely entered into by non-Indigenous people. Through his work as an educator, Alistair Stewart has experimented with thinking *as* a Murray Cod while exploring the Murray River to enable different understandings of the dynamic relationships between the more-than-human and human, highlighting the role of humans in determining the existence and survival of the fish (Stewart 139).

In *Watershed* the future of the Sturtspend region, beset by the effects of climate change, hangs in the balance, as do the lives of the central protagonists. Nature is out of kilter, requiring recalibration through ritual. Eve reluctantly attends the Ouyen raindance with other women from Sturtspend, and finds that something inside her has been unlocked. This raindance, based on a real event which occurred in 2013, might be seen as an appropriation of Indigenous ritual, albeit Native American rather than Aboriginal, organised by white women from the Mallee. It functions as a way of bringing people together and healing their despair, or allowing them to forget temporarily. For Eve, it means a renewal of hope for her marriage and the possibility of a baby girl.

Non-Indigenous author Charlie Archbold’s *Mallee Boys* (2017) also offers hopeful resolution, and the presence of the Murray at both its opening and conclusion suggest the role of the river in this coming of age story. Sandy, the fifteen-year-old protagonist and narrator of the novel, feels out of place in the normative hyper-masculine culture of the Mallee that also informs his all-male household (Sandy’s mother’s death, one year earlier when we first meet Sandy, is a structuring force in the text). His association with the river—an ambivalent, but persistent one—and his enjoyment of floating, suspended in its waters, suggests a contrast with the preferred modes of movement and sociality in the world around him: fast cars, drug use, aggressive sports, and wearying farming life.

The river is not a straightforward maternal replacement, however, and the novel opens with Sandy's near-drowning when he is trapped momentarily under the water by a dead, decaying cow moving down the driver: 'Bloated, floating and limp from trying to kill me' (6)—a playful sign of the oppressive future Sandy faces if he stays in the Mallee. The novel's *bildungsroman* arc focuses on Sandy's dawning recognition that he cannot take on a farming life, and must leave the Mallee to find self-fulfilment. A private school scholarship in the city is the way to realise this, emphasising the economic inequities that shape Mallee life, and that those who want 'to leave' must invariably transcend. This economic gift is Sandy's way out, and enables his circumvention of a prescriptive Mallee identity: the man working the land. His final reflection takes place back on the Murray:

I've scanned the river for cows and debris and I'm confident I can scull around in peace... In three weeks I'll be in Adelaide, and I'm ready... I lie back, my head under, relaxing into the river. Staring up at the lazy clouds, I think about Mum. You know, since losing her, I'm more resilient to goodbyes. (205)

Seemingly worlds apart from Cato's Mrs Slope and Meehan's 'boy,' Sandy also experiences the river as motivity, where the movement of water, and promise of passage conveyed by its flow, suggests other possibilities for lives constrained by cultural and environmental strictures. Water is a transitional force across the texts, and both signifies and enables freedom—if only temporary—from prevailing, disabling realities of deprivation, violence, and cultural normativity.

Moreover, the river is figured as a point of engagement, a zone of transition, a dividing line and a source of fertility, energy and life. The river is not, however, a simple site of reconciliation and freedom; it is also associated with death, danger and destruction. It is also a place of division and dissonance. But, in all the texts we have discussed, it is significant for being dynamic, and not a fixed, static site.

In our attempt to write a new literary history of the Mallee region, we seek to elicit such narratives of relation and transformation—even if those narratives still present a challenging environment—rather than merely reiterating dominant themes of disconnection, exclusion and loss. The Murray narratives discussed here exceed narrow discourses of rural and colonial declensionism while still keeping history in close sight, and often in reference to, other modes of inhabitation, relations across difference, and possibilities for diverse futures. A literary history guided by the river rather than the nation (and its heroist, singular figures), releases the Mallee from its place as colonial fantasy and abjected site, opening up more complex accounts of narrative and cultural diversity, more-than-human entanglements, and ecological dynamism. It is worth noting here too that, as part of the Murray Darling Basin, the Murray River flags another bioregion which further challenges a fixed geography of the Mallee and its material and imaginary expanse.

*Watershed* is a key text for our project in this regard, written by an Indigenous author who was not born in the Mallee. The main character is not Indigenous but creation stories are told through an Indigenous character, Ace. With its descriptions of the degradation of the Murray, the book implicitly critiques the colonial nation-building project. It brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives of the river, spotlights the history of post-war immigration to the Mallee (rather than fetishising nineteenth century 'origins'), recognises the power and danger of the river and acknowledges the threat of climate change (through references to drought and salination). It

also doesn't define its landscape as the Mallee, rather versions of 'the Mallee' assemble through the text—its colonial and agricultural identity, its riverine and back country environments, its long ongoing history of Indigenous inhabitation, its multispecies world, its emotional and psychic currents that flow rather than dessicate or dig into the ground.

After seeking permission of Bayet-Charlton's family, we plan to celebrate the text through a river walk in Mildura which features readings from the novel. It is a powerful, multigeneric work which is largely unknown by the Mallee community. A walk such as this can raise the book's profile and bring it to life for a local audience. Here, Mallee communities—along with some non-Mallee residents—are not merely the passive receivers of a literary history, but are active in its production. A literary river walk enables us to connect with the multiple, sometimes simultaneous, histories of the river, including the reported presence of Indigenous burial sites along its banks which has yet to be officially recognised. Extracts from other Murray writings (including Cato, Archbold, and Lapthorne) will also be read by local readers, putting these texts into conversation with each other, and the place. After the live event, the literary river walk will be made available as a self-guided walk via an app, significantly expanding the life of the event.

We have also been coordinating a series of book group reading events at libraries and community centres around the Mallee which give readers the opportunity to reflect on what they recognise and what they reject in selected Mallee-based books. *Watershed* is one of eight texts discussed in these group fora. Readers are encouraged to 'talk back' to the texts, noting mistakes, omissions and what they may see as misrepresentations. Our aim here is to elicit what Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa call 'a reader's version of literary history' (2) of the Mallee region, to see what new knowledge is produced when local readers engage with literature about their place, in that place. In these encounters, we have tried to find out how Mallee literary works are received by readers who are residents of this region, what understandings of the Mallee emerge from their discussions of the texts, and how cultures of creativity and sociability are mediated through textual engagement. This approach reorients the location of creativity from the author to the place and its communities. These are just two strategies towards a participatory form of literary-history-making in the Mallee.

These versions of doing regional literary history, partial and open-ended, approach 'the Mallee' as geographically dynamic, temporally fluid, and globally connected to past and future. If the Mallee region is always in the process of forming, it is always open to the outside and to change, not condemned to stasis or inevitable decline, narratively or materially. As we deploy this approach in our literary history project, and in the context of this paper, looking to the river—a fluid, and multi-storied, part of the Mallee—the region appears as a zone of possibility rather than an already-determined failure. Rivers are by their nature fluid, ever-changing and replenishing, and consequently resist static representations. Cato, Meehan, Green, Bayet-Charlton and Archbold have used attributes of the 'actual' Murray River to produce their own textual constructions which convey its symbolic and imaginative importance to the region. The textual history of the Mallee is long and multiple, but not always visible in accounts of regional literature in Australia. The recovery of a diverse and dynamic Mallee in its literary history offers much for the re-imagining and re-making of Mallee futures. By engaging and repositioning books such as the ones we have discussed here, an acknowledgement of the abundance and diversity of Mallee imaginaries may at last be possible, and in turn, an expansion, through literary history, of what the Mallee is and might be: a place of creativity that exceeds the constraints of national form and its narratives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Local government boundaries do not exactly correspond with the Victorian Mallee's southern boundary, which can lead to confusion about exactly where the border of the Mallee should fall.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes and Mirmohamadi make the case for the symbolic nationalist of the Mallee narrative, arguing that 'the Mallee experience became emblematic of the broader Australian struggle with the land' (191). Don Watson makes a similar point in his study, *The Bush*, reflecting on the place of the Mallee in Australia's self-image: 'the romance of the wheat... The bronzed and wiry women. Scorching heat, mice and locust plagues, dust storms... We learnt these things at school. The Mallee was a model of national progress, its people Australians of heroic quality' (152).

<sup>3</sup> In the Australian context too, 'the nation' is a form associated unavoidably with dispossession. On this point, Bruce Bennett (in Mead) argues: 'The stimulus for regional literary history has often been celebratory and therefore ambivalent. Centenaries, sesquicentenaries etc. of first settlement, prompt the desire for stocktakes of substantive cultural achievement, but they are also reminders of the violence of colonial origins' (556–57).

<sup>4</sup> *Up the Murray* was serialised by *The Australasian* in nine fortnightly instalments from 27 March–17 July 1875.

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